



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

THE RIGHT HON JACK STRAW MP

To whom it may concern:

RE: Testimony of contribution by Professor Jon Tonge (Former Chair of Youth Citizenship Commission) to Government policy.

Professor Jon Tonge chaired the Youth Citizenship Commission, set up by the previous Administration to inform policy on increasing political engagement among young people. The Commission had a significant impact on the direction of government policy and also on the wider political debate concerning youth citizenship.

The specific remit of the Youth Citizenship Commission was to:

1. Examine what citizenship means to young people.
2. Consider how to increase young people's participation in politics; the development of citizenship amongst disadvantaged groups; how active citizenship can be prompted through volunteering and community engagement; and how the political system can reflect the communication preferences of young people.
3. Lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16.

The YCC delivered its final report, *Making the connection: Building youth citizenship in the UK*, to the Government in June 2009. HM Government then published our response, *An Agenda for Youth Engagement*, on February 12th 2010. While I will outline some of the key influences the YCC report had on Government policy the response itself is full of detail in this area and I enclose a link below:

[\[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100403220440/http://cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/333826/youthengagement.pdf\]](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100403220440/http://cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/333826/youthengagement.pdf)

An immediate result of the Commission's recommendations was the appointment of a new Minister for Young Citizens and Youth Engagement, in October 2010, to "take forward appropriate action arising from the recommendations of the youth citizenship commission report".

Following the publication of the YCC's final report the Government launched a website, called Join, which was intended to act as an online hub, allowing young people to access funding and general information about citizenship opportunities in the area of youth engagement. In the Ministry of Justice we set up an online educational resource called 'Your Justice, Your World' in July 2009 which the Government's response made clear had, "the potential to become the first port of call for learning about justice in England and Wales."

The Attorney General's office also began work on establishing what they called the *Youth Network*. The *Network* was aimed at ensuring that young people had, "the right opportunities to learn about the legal and justice systems and will provide opportunities to develop skills, such as debating, which enable their participation." In



addition, new social networking projects were established on Twitter and Facebook, in order that Government communicate with young people more effectively using up-to-date media systems.

The YCC report made clear that Government, both at local and national level, should promote better youth engagement with democratic processes. Following this recommendation by the Commission the Government put in place a 'duty to involve', requiring local authorities to consider how to engage on a permanent basis with their local populations, including young people, on the delivery of services, where it is appropriate to do so.

The YCC report also highlighted the important role voluntary work can play in a young person's life and recommended that we "explore whether a compulsory programme of civic service for young people might be worthwhile." In response to this the Government made clear "that all young people should be given the opportunity to take part in some form of service to their communities...The Prime Minister has set out his expectation that, in time, all young people will contribute at least 50 hours of community action by the age of 19." To make this commitment a reality we announced £117 million of investment in the 'v' youth volunteering charity which then planned to recruit one million new young volunteers. Tellingly, the Conservative party echoed these commitments regarding youth citizenship with policy proposals of their own and I understand that this focus on youth civic service and volunteering is being continued under the present Government.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the YCC was in respect of its findings about citizenship education and the voting age. The Commission put great emphasis on the potential of citizenship education to increase awareness about politics and civic responsibility. It also recognised the improvements that have been made in the delivery of citizenship education and made a number of recommendations about how that could be reinforced. I believe that the emphasis that the YCC placed upon citizenship education will have an important influence in ensuring that it remains an integral part of the school curriculum.

Finally, one of the central aspects of the YCC report – indeed the subject of a separate report – was the question of lowering the voting age to 16. The Commission explored this issue carefully and, without declaring itself to be in favour or against a change in the voting age, exposed the complexities of the issue and the fact that a majority of the public were opposed to lowering the voting age.

This encouraged the Government to pause for further thought on this issue and ensured that the voting age was not changed before the last election. At the same time, however, the YCC was very clear in its recommendation that electoral registration of 16-18 year olds should take place in schools and colleges, and we are likely to see strong pressure for this change to be made in the next couple of years.

In summary, I am very grateful for the work that Professor Tonge did in chairing the YCC, and am very clear that the Commission has had an important and ongoing impact on policy and political debate around the issues of youth citizenship and political engagement.

JACK STRAW